

EXHIBIT 13

Saudi Arabia

Not Free

25

100

A [Obstacles to Access](#) 11 25

B [Limits on Content](#) 10 35

C [Violations of User Rights](#) 4 40

Last Year's Score & Status

27 100 Not Free



Overview

While internet access is widespread and relatively affordable, Saudi Arabia's restrictive absolute monarchy places extensive limits on the range of information and services available online. Authorities operate extensive censorship and surveillance systems, and regime critics, activists, and others perceived as voicing dissent online are subject to severe punishment. Dissidents outside the country are increasingly becoming targets of state repression. Mounting evidence indicates that prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered by Saudi security agents at the

country's consulate in Istanbul. In the aftermath of his death, reports emerged of coordinated efforts by the government to suppress online discussion of the killing and associated criticism of authorities, and to smear government opponents.

The absolute monarchy restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties. No officials at the national level are elected. The regime relies on extensive surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, appeals to sectarianism and ethnicity, and public spending supported by oil revenues to maintain power.

Key Developments

June 1, 2018 - May 31, 2019

- Mounting evidence indicates that Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent journalist, was tortured and murdered by Saudi security agents in October 2018 at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Moreover, human rights groups reported that a Yemeni writer and online activist was forcibly disappeared by Saudi authorities in September of the same year, while a number of women activists testified that they faced torture and sexual abuse while in detention ([see C7](#)).
- The number of blocked websites, including both international and local news sites, doubled after Khashoggi's murder. Additionally, in December 2018, at the behest of the state telecommunications regulator, Netflix removed an episode of the *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* from programming available in Saudi Arabia; the episode was critical of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, and investigated the government's role in Khashoggi's death ([see B1](#) and [B2](#)).
- Several revelations of government campaigns to shape online news coverage, discourage certain hashtags on Twitter, and smear government critics emerged in the wake of Khashoggi's death ([see B5](#)).
- In the spring of 2019, authorities arrested eight reformist writers and bloggers who had been supportive of a group of women activists arrested the previous year.

- In September 2018, prosecutors recommended the death penalty for cleric Salman al-Awdah, who has a large online following and faces dozens of criminal charges. Many believe he was targeted for a tweet encouraging reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar ([see C3](#)).
- Additional reports of government surveillance through the use of sophisticated technology emerged during the coverage period. For instance, Pegasus spyware—which was developed by the NSO Group, an Israeli company, and is sold to governments—was allegedly used to hack into and monitor the phones of several Saudi activists ([see C5](#)).

A Obstacles to Access

The government maintains technical control over internet infrastructure, which is generally robust, though rural villages and provinces have historically had poorer internet connectivity compared to urban metropolitan areas. The government has sought to expand connectivity in underserved regions, and at the beginning of 2019, an initiative to bring internet services to rural areas had been 75 percent completed. Despite announcing in 2017 that approved Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) call services would be permitted to operate, some remain restricted. Entry to the Saudi telecommunications market is somewhat hampered by regulatory obstacles.

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

56

Rapid growth in internet and communications technologies (ICTs) has produced robust infrastructure and widespread access to the internet, with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) reporting that 93.31 percent of individuals used the medium in 2018.¹ Saudis are increasingly using smartphones to go online. In 2019, the number of household fixed broadband asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) subscriptions dropped below 1 million total subscriptions for the first time in over ten years,² leaving the country with a 36 percent fixed-penetration rate in the

third quarter of 2018.³

Mobile broadband penetration, in turn, reached 91.8 percent at the end of September 2018, with roughly 30 million subscriptions. This was up from 76 percent at the end of 2016, and 102 percent in 2015.⁴ The dip between 2015 and 2016 was largely attributed to the deportation of thousands of undocumented workers and the deactivation of their prepaid mobile accounts,⁵ in addition to new requirements that all mobile subscribers register with their fingerprints in order to obtain service (see C4).

Saudi Arabia's industry regulator, the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), has pressed forward with plans to roll out 5G-ready hardware in the country, a process that began in December 2017. In January 2019, it awarded new 4G and 5G frequencies to the three largest⁶ mobile operators in the Middle East: the majority state-owned Saudi Telecom Company (STC); Mobily, which is owned by Etisalat, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE); and Zain, from Kuwait.⁷ All three operators have partnered with a range of telecommunications providers, including Ericsson, Cisco, Huawei, and Nokia,⁸ to ready their networks.⁹

As part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform plan, the government aims to boost high-speed broadband coverage, including surpassing "90 per cent of housing coverage in dense populated cities and 66 per cent in other urban areas."¹⁰ In December 2018, STC, Mobily, and Zain agreed to improve their network infrastructure through three years of investments in exchange for reaching a settlement with the government over disputed fees from 2009 to 2017.¹¹

International internet bandwidth was 5,620 Gbps at the end of 2017, representing a 65 percent increase from 2016.¹²

- ^{1.} "ICT Statistics: Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet," International Telecommunications Union, June 2019, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.
- ^{2.} BuddeComm Report, "Saudi Arabia - Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband - Statistics and Analyses," January 30, 2019, <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Saudi-Arabia-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broa...>.
- ^{3.} "KSA IC Indicators End of Q3 2018," Communications and Information Technology Commission, accessed March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2XwZpch>.
- ^{4.} "KSA IC Indicators End of Q3 2018," Communications and Information

Technology Commission, accessed March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2XwZpch>.

- [5.](#) Matt Smith, “Saudi mobile subscriptions shrink on labor crackdown, hajj limits,” Al Arabiya News, January 26, 2014, <http://ara.tv/bkgq6>.
- [6.](#) Laura Graves, “Saudi Arabia makes major strides in the tower industry,” November 29, 2018, <https://www.towerxchange.com/saudi-arabia-makes-major-strides-in-the-to...>.
- [7.](#) “Saudi telecom regulator awards new frequencies to STC, Zain, Mobily,” Argaam, January 23, 2019, <https://www.argaam.com/en/article/articledetail/id/590961>.
- [8.](#) “Nokia and Saudi Telecom Co. (STC) sign deal for 5G network launch and early rollout of services,” Nokia, February 25, 2019, <https://www.nokia.com/about-us/news/releases/2019/02/25/nokia-and-saudi...>; “Saudi Telecom Company (STC) and Cisco Sign Strategic MoU to Bring the Benefits of 5G to Saudi Arabia,” Cisco, February 27, 2018, <https://newsroom.cisco.com/press-release-content?type=webcontent&articl...>
- [9.](#) BuddeComm Report, “Saudi Arabia - Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband - Statistics and Analyses,” January 30, 2019, <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Saudi-Arabia-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broa...>.
- [10.](#) “Saudi Vision 2030 Document,” Saudi Vision 2030, 2017, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>.
- [11.](#) Tom Arnold, “Saudi telecom operators agree royalty fees,” Reuters, December 18, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2LI7viu>.
- [12.](#) “Annual Report, 2017,” Communications and Information Technology Commission, 2018, https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/mediacenter/annualreport/Documents/PR_REP_01....

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?

23

Rural villages and provinces in Saudi Arabia—home to about 16 percent of the population in 2017, according to the World Bank¹—have historically had poorer internet connectivity compared to urban metropolitan areas, due in part to the desert terrain of vast swathes of the country.² However, the government has sought to improve connectivity in these regions. As of January 2019, over 75

percent of the Universal Services project, an initiative established by the government in 2006 to bring internet services to rural areas, had been completed.³

According to Cable, a London-based broadband comparison website, the average monthly cost of consumer broadband in 2018 was \$96 per month. While Cable's data indicates that prices are high relative to the region⁴ broadband is still reasonably priced within the country, amounting to 1.27 percent of monthly gross national income per capita.⁵ Several internet service providers (ISPs) provide zero-rating services, offering some content or services for free. For example, Zain provides unlimited access to social media platforms including WhatsApp and YouTube as part of prepaid mobile packages,⁶ while STC also offers unlimited data within certain bundles, including unlimited YouTube access through prepaid plans offered by Jawwy,⁷ a brand launched by STC in May 2016.⁸

Internet cafes, once prevalent, have become less popular in recent years due to the wide availability and affordability of broadband access. Internet cafes are mainly used by young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to congregate and socialize. Coffee shops at which customers can enjoy free Wi-Fi access with their paid beverages have grown in popularity among businesspeople, young adults, and single men. In addition, more female-only coffee shops have been opened to serve women and girls who previously were limited to shops' family sections.

- ¹. "Rural population (% of population)," World Bank, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sp.rur.totl.zs>.
- ². "Rural coverage: strategies for sustainability." GSMA Intelligence, June 2015, <https://www.gsmainelligence.com/research/?file=53525bcdac7cd801eccef74...>
- ³. "Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband in Saudi Arabia Market Analysis, Strategic Assessment, Trend Outlook and Business Opportunities 2019-2022," WiseGuyReports, January 7, 2019 <https://reut.rs/2IPIVbV>.
- ⁴. "Worldwide Broadband Price Comparison," Cable, 2018, <https://www.cable.co.uk/broadband/pricing/worldwide-comparison/>.
- ⁵. "Inclusive Internet Index 2019", Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019, <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/performance/affo...>
- ⁶. "Shabab Prepaid," Zain, https://www.sa.zain.com/autoforms/portal/site/personal/voice_plans/prep...
- ⁷. "Fiber Plans," STC, accessed September 25, 2019, <https://www.stc.com.sa/wps/wcm/connect/english/individual/internet/inte...>;

“Jawwy SIM 150,” Jawwy, accessed September 25, 2019, <https://shop.jawwy.sa/>.

- [8.](#) Anne Morris, “STC launches Jawwy brand with ItsOn to disrupt Saudi mobile market,” Fierce Wireless, May 4, 2016, <https://www.fiercewireless.com/europe/stc-launches-jawwy-brand-itson-to...>,

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

36

The Saudi government exercises technical control over internet infrastructure for the purpose of restricting connectivity. Notably, regulators and telecommunications companies have taken an aggressive stance against free or low-cost voice over internet protocol (VoIP) call services that potentially reduce the amount of standard mobile calls, circumvent the regulatory environment, and in some cases bypass the surveillance apparatus. Internet providers previously blocked VoIP apps including Viber,^{[1](#)} WhatsApp,^{[2](#)} FaceTime,^{[3](#)} and Facebook Messenger.^{[4](#)} Integrated chat systems on certain social media websites, including Facebook Messenger, have also been blocked in the past.^{[5](#)}

In September 2017, the government announced that it had lifted a years-long ban on all VoIP call services, saying those that satisfied regulatory requirements would be permitted to operate, though subject to surveillance by the CITC. The shift was part of the government’s broader economic reforms aimed at bolstering the business environment.^{[6](#)} However, several VoIP call services, including WhatsApp, remained blocked during the coverage period of this report, and could only be accessed using a virtual private network (VPN).

Saudi Arabia is connected to the internet through two country-level data service providers: the Integrated Telecom Company, and Bayanat al-Oula for Network Services. The servers they utilize are split between the state-owned internet backbone and global servers. All user requests that arrive via Saudi ISPs travel through these servers, making them subject to censorship at a centralized point.

- [1.](#) Chris Welch, “Saudi Arabia clamps down on messaging apps with ban of Viber” The Verge, June 5, 2013, <https://www.theverge.com/2013/6/5/4398934/saudi-arabia-bans-viber-messa...>
- [2.](#) Helen Gaskell, “WhatsApp's new call service to be blocked in KSA” ITP.net,

March 17, 2015, <https://www.itp.net/602475-whatsapps-new-call-service-to-be-blocked-in-...>.

- 3. 32 “Apple’s FaceTime is now available in Saudi Arabia after the latest iOS (11.3) update,” MENABytes, March 29, 2018, <https://www.menabytes.com/apple-facetime-saudi/>.
- 4. Andrew Griffin, “Facebook Messenger blocked in Saudi Arabia: Chat apps have voice and video call functions banned over ‘regulations’”, The Independent, May 13, 2016, <http://ind.pn/2t6juKX>.
- 5. 34 Ray Walsh, “5 Best VPN Saudi Arabia - How to Open Blocked Sites in KSA,” ProPrivacy, August 28, 2018, <https://proprivacy.com/vpn-comparison/vpn-saudi-arabia>.
- 6. “Saudi Arabia to lift ban on internet calls,” BBC News, September 20, 2017, <http://bbc.in/2p5Cxkj>; Taylor Hatmaker, “Saudi Arabia opens itself up to Skype, WhatsApp and other internet calling services,” TechCrunch, September 20, 2017, <http://tcrn.ch/2xecn4e>; Stephen Kalin, Alexander Cornwell, and Elaine Hardcastle, ed. “Saudi lifting ban on Skype, WhatsApp calls, but will monitor them,” Reuters, September 21, 2017, <https://reut.rs/2fdj1ID>.

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?

16

The two country-level service providers offer services to licensed ISPs, which in turn sell connections to dial-up and leased-line clients. Broadband and mobile phone service is provided by STC, Mobily, and Zain. In addition to these companies, Virgin Mobile (operating with STC) and Lebara (operating with Mobily) have been operating since 2014.

According to a Saudi telecommunications executive, barriers to entry into the local telecoms market are structural rather than official; they include, for example, requiring new entrants to have a prelicensed local operator to operate under. The executive stated that further structural reforms are required in order to make a level playing field in the Saudi telecoms sector, but that this does not appear to be a priority of the CITC.¹

In December 2018, STC, Mobily, and Zain reached an agreement with the state to recalculate their annual royalty fees to 10 percent of net revenue from mobile

services starting retroactively from January 1, 2018. According to a statement from Mobily, the operator would pay an additional fee equivalent to one percent of its annual revenue. Operators previously paid royalties of 15 percent of net revenues from mobile services.²

As part of its overall economic and social reform strategy, the government has streamlined laws to attract foreign companies, including cloud computing and technology service providers, and has eased rules around foreign ownership of companies and other regulatory hurdles. In December 2017, global technology companies such as Amazon Web Services held discussions with Saudi authorities to explore potentially offering cloud services in Saudi Arabia.³ However, as of February 2019, these plans have reportedly been put on hold due to an alleged “feud” between Amazon’s founder and chief executive officer (CEO), Jeff Bezos, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The feud is ostensibly related to the *Washington Post*’s continued reporting on Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s killing; Bezos owns the outlet, and it is where Khashoggi worked as a columnist prior to his assassination in October 2018 (see B1, C7).⁴

The main telecommunications providers have been accused by campaigners and trade associations of engaging in unfair trade practices.⁵ For example, Ibrahim al-sheikh of Asharqia Chamber, a government-linked trade promotion organization, criticized STC and Mobily after they increased the prices of data packs by up to 50 percent in January 2018.⁶ The following month, local press sources reported that the CITC intervened and ordered both companies to reinstate the previous prices for the packages.⁷

- ¹. “Interview with Saudi executive.” April 2019, Riyadh, telephone interview.
- ². Tom Arnold and Christian Schmollinger, ed., “Saudi telecom operators agree annual royalty fees,” Reuters, December 16, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2LI7viu>; Bernd Debusmann, Jr., “Saudi telcos get royalty reduction in return for network investment,” ITP.net, December 17, 2018, <http://www.itp.net/618488-saudi-telcos-get-royalty-reduction-in-return-...>, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/technology/409812-saudi-telcos-agree-to...>
- ³. Katie Paul, “Apple and Amazon in talks to set up in Saudi Arabia,” Reuters, December 28, 2017, <http://reut.rs/2CfTNZn>.
- ⁴. Olivia Feld and James Ticomb, “Amazon expansion into Saudi Arabia in doubt after feud between Jeff Bezos and Crown Prince,” The Telegraph, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2019/02/16/amazon-saudi-investme...>

- 5. Khaled Alshaya, ‘We will render you bankrupt’: a campaign to boycott Saudi telecommunication companies,” [in Arabic] Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, October 2, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/medianews/2016/10/2/ةلمح-مكسلفن-حارر-شلةعطاقم>.
- 6. “STC, Mobily hike data pack charges,” Saudi Gazette, January 6, 2018, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/525599/SAUDI-ARABIA/STC-Mobily-hike-....>.
- 7. “After the intervention of the Communications and Information Technology Commission, two companies revise internet prices,” [in Arabic] Arabian Business, January 24, 2018, <https://arabic.arabianbusiness.com/content/330076>

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

04

The CITC is responsible for regulating the internet.¹ The board of directors of the CITC is headed by the minister of communications and information technology, who, like all cabinet members, is appointed by the monarch. Abdullah Amer al-Sawaha² has held the post since April 2017, and has been tasked with developing the country’s ICT infrastructure in line with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 reform agenda.³ There is no evidence in the public domain of explicit legal guarantees that protect the CITC from political or commercial interference.

In addition to internet regulation—which includes sending content removal requests to social networks, usually related to political or sexual content—the CITC is tasked with controlling the price that telecommunications companies are allowed to charge for cross-network calls ([see B3](#)).

Previously, all internet governance fell under the purview of the Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of the King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology (KACST). Established in 1998 and reporting directly to the vice president for scientific research support of KACST, the ISU now only provides internet access and technical support to government departments, as well as Saudi research and academic institutions.⁴

In early March 2018, the CITC began regulating cloud computing in the country, establishing registration, disclosure, and other requirements for cloud service providers.⁵

- ^{1.} “Background,” Communications and Information Technology Commission, accessed on September 25, 2019, <https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/AboutUs/Pages/History.aspx>.
- ^{2.} “Board of Directors”, Communications and Information Technology Commission, accessed on September 25, 2019, <https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/AboutUs/Pages/BoardofDirectors.aspx>.
- ^{3.} “Abdullah Amer Al-Swaha,” Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, March 14, 2019, <https://www.mcit.gov.sa/en/ministers-history/148063>.
- ^{4.} “CITC Roles and Responsibilities,” Communications and Information Technology Commission, accessed September 25, 2019, <https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/aboutus/areasofwork/Pages/default.aspx>.
- ^{5.} “Cloud Computing Regulatory Framework,” Communications and Information Technology Commission, 2018, <https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/RulesandSystems/RegulatoryDocuments/Pages/CC...>

B Limits on Content

The government continued to block websites deemed to host harmful, illegal, or anti-Islamic content, and remains intolerant of criticism of the Saudi royal family or its allies among the Gulf Arab states, online and otherwise. Researchers found a twofold increase in the number of censored websites after the October 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Saudi authorities successfully lobbied Netflix to remove a critical episode of a comedy show. Online self-censorship remains prevalent. Revelations of government campaigns to shape online news coverage and discourage particular hashtags on Twitter point to the broad nature of government efforts to manipulate Saudi Arabia’s online information landscape.

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content?

16

Authorities block a wide range of websites under rules prohibiting content deemed harmful, illegal, anti-Islamic, or offensive, and do not tolerate criticism of the Saudi royal family or its allies among the Gulf Arab states, online or otherwise. According to Censored Planet, a University of Michigan-based platform, the number of censored websites in Saudi Arabia increased twofold shortly after the October 2018 murder of Khashoggi, who had become increasingly critical of the Saudi government since going into self-exile in the US in 2017. Access to international media outlets including Fox News, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was temporarily blocked in Saudi Arabia in the wake of his murder, alongside local news websites such as that of the English-language daily *Arab News*¹ (see B4).

The websites of the London-based *Al-Araby al-Jadeed* and its English equivalent the *New Arab*, which regularly publish content critical of the Saudi government, were blocked in January 2016² and remained blocked as of May 2019.³

Websites and social media pages belonging to human rights or political organizations, such as the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), are blocked.⁴ The websites of global advocacy organizations, such as Avaaz, are blocked.⁵ Authorities have also blocked the website of the Islamic Umma Party, the country's only political party, which operates underground because political parties are illegal. The party has called for the royal family to step down.

Authorities also seek to disrupt the dissemination of violent extremist content,⁶ sometimes resulting in the blocking of licensed news sites that have published photos of members of the Islamic State (IS) militant group.⁷ Pages related to pornography, gambling, and drugs are routinely blocked, as are websites that may be used to distribute copyrighted materials, such as the Pirate Bay.⁸

Popular social media and communication apps are not blocked, although authorities have imposed restrictions on their use. The messaging app Telegram has faced temporary throttling since January 2016, when users reported severe bandwidth limitations preventing file and image sharing.⁹ Telegram’s CEO confirmed the issue, but said that the “reasons [behind the restrictions] are unknown.”¹⁰ Other platforms’ VoIP services have been blocked by the authorities (see A3).

Many Saudi internet users have become savvy at using circumvention tools such as Hotspot Shield, which allows users to access a VPN to bypass censorship,^{[11](#)} though their use is illegal.^{[12](#)} However, the websites of many circumvention tools, such as Tor and the major VPN providers, are blocked by the government.^{[13](#)}

- [1.](#) Martin Giles, "Online censorship in Saudi Arabia soared after Jamal Khashoggi's murder," MIT Technology Review, November 20, 2018,
[https://www.technologyreview.com/s/612448/online-censorship-saudi-arabi....](https://www.technologyreview.com/s/612448/online-censorship-saudi-arabi...)
- [2.](#) Jasper Jackson, "Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt block access to Qatari-owned news website," The Guardian, January 5, 2016,
[https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/05/saudi-arabia-uae-egypt-bl....](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/05/saudi-arabia-uae-egypt-bl...)
- [3.](#) "Web Connectivity Test: Saudi Arabia," OONI Explorer, May 10, 2019,
https://explorer.ooni.org/measurement/20190510T170300Z_AS35819_SoSV508A...
- .
- [4.](#) According to the Alkasir.com, which provides information on blocked websites, the URLs acpra6.org and anhri.net are blocked in Saudi Arabia:
"Cyber-Censorship Map," Alkasir, accessed on March 2, 2013,
<https://alkasir.com/map>.
- [5.](#) "Web Connectivity Test: Saudi Arabia," OONI Explorer, May 4, 2019,
https://explorer.ooni.org/measurement/20190504T210937Z_AS39891_RhXSalgZ...
- .
- [6.](#) "The censorship policy of websites that spread extremist ideologies has proven its success," [in Arabic] Al Arabiya News, May 29, 2012,
<https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/05/29/217356.html>.
- [7.](#) "Anha Newspaper Blocked," Al Hayat, May 23, 2015,
<http://www.alhayat.com/article/662947/-بجح/ملاعلا/تايلحم-ةيدوعسل/ا-ةفيعص>
- [8.](#) "Ministry of Culture and Information blocks 52 websites for infringing the rights of authors," [in Arabic] Al Riyadh Newspaper, October 2012,
<http://www.alriyadh.com/776855#>; "How to Unblock the Pirate Bay in 2018,"

VPN Pioneer, February 5, 2018, Ernesto, "Saudi Arabia Government Blocks The Pirate Bay (and More)," TorrentFreak, April 2, 2014,

<https://torrentfreak.com/saudi-arabia-government-blocks-pirate-bay-1404...>

- 9. Amir-Esmaeil Bozorgzadeh , "UPDATED: Telegram's Troubled Times In The Middle East" TechCrunch, January 12, 2016, <http://tcrn.ch/1PpVhhB>.
- 10. Pavel Durov on Twitter <https://twitter.com/durov/status/686186906028216320?s=20>, and The Telegram Team, "Voice Messages 2.0, Secret Chats 3.0 and..." Telegram Blog, February 12, 2016, <https://telegram.org/blog/voice-2-secret-3>.
- 11. Saudis refer to this circumvention tool as a "proxy breaker."
- 12. Ray Walsh, "5 Best VPN Saudi Arabia - How to Open Blocked Sites in KSA," BestVPN.com, August 28, 2018, <https://proprivacy.com/vpn-comparison/vpn-saudi-arabia>.
- 13. Examples include Hotspot Shield and Hide My Ass!.

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content?

14

Blocking and filtering by authorities is complemented by state and nonstate censorship and forced content removal. Outlets frequently delete user-generated content that could be deemed inappropriate or inconsistent with societal norms, as they can be held legally liable for content posted on their platforms ([see B3](#)).¹ As a result, it is unusual to find any antigovernment comments on the websites of major Saudi newspapers, which do not reflect the diversity of political views seen on social networks.

Commentators have accused social media companies of complicity with governmental authorities in censoring online content. In December 2018, Netflix, after receiving a complaint from the CITC, removed from its programming available in Saudi Arabia an episode of the comedy show *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*. The episode in question scrutinized the government's alleged role in Khashoggi's murder ([see B1](#)) and criticized Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen. In its request, the CITC claimed that the episode violated Article 6 of the country's Anti-Cyber Crime law, which criminalizes the "production, preparation, transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals, and privacy, through the information network or computers."[2](#)

In December 2017, Omar Abdulaziz, a Canada-based Saudi dissident, stated that a hashtag he created that was critical of Turki Al al-Sheikh, head of the General Sport Authority, was removed from Twitter shortly after it was retweeted 6,000 times, and that he received no response from Twitter regarding its removal. Ghanem al-Dosari, a London-based Saudi dissident who runs a satirical YouTube channel addressing Saudi issues, claimed that Facebook prevented him from accessing his account for nine months.[3](#)

In September 2017, Snapchat removed Qatari news channel Al Jazeera from its Discover platform at the behest of Saudi authorities, in a move that was widely perceived to stem from Saudi Arabia's ongoing political dispute with Qatar. The Saudi government claimed that Al Jazeera violated its laws on media and cybercrime, without publicly specifying which laws these violations pertained to.[4](#) Snapchat had received and complied with a government removal request, according to its May 2018 Transparency Report.[5](#) Snapchat confirmed the removal was done to "comply with local laws."[6](#)

- [1.](#) "Raif Badawi's wife provides "Anhaa" with the list of charges against her husband and calls for his release [in Arabic] Anhaa, April 25, 2013, accessed in 2013, <http://www.an7a.com/102662>.
- [2.](#) Ahmed al-Omran, "Netflix pulls episode of comedy show in Saudi Arabia," Financial Times, 1 January 2019, <https://on.ft.com/2Rod19n>
- [3.](#) "Saudi Arabia's government might be getting help from social media giants to shut down dissent," Newsweek, December 22, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-crack-down-social-media-dissent-7...>
- [4.](#) Ahmad Zidan, "Undiscoverable: How Al-Jazeera's Snapchat channel disappeared from three Gulf nations," Committee to Protect Journalists,

September 10, 2018, <https://cpj.org/blog/2018/09/undiscoverable-how-al-jazeeras-snapchat-ch...>

- 5. “Transparency Report: July 1 2017 – December 31 2017,” Snapchat, May 15, 2018, <https://www.snap.com/en-US/privacy/transparency/2017-12-31>.
- 6. Ahmad Zidan, “Undiscoverable: How Al-Jazeera's Snapchat channel disappeared from three Gulf nations,” Committee to Protect Journalists, September 10, 2018, <https://cpj.org/blog/2018/09/undiscoverable-how-al-jazeeras-snapchat-ch...>

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?

24

The government is somewhat transparent about what content it blocks. While the list of banned sites is not publicly available, users who attempt to access a banned site are redirected to a page displaying the message, “Access to the requested URL is not allowed!” A green background is displayed on sites blocked by the CITC, whereas sites blocked by the Ministry of Culture and Information for licensing violations or copyright infringement have a blue background.

The government receives blocking requests from members of the public, who can use a web-based form to submit a complaint regarding “undesirable” material.1 Once an individual submits the form, a team of CITC employees determines whether the request is justified.2

Data service providers must block all sites banned by the CITC,3 and failure to abide by these bans may result in a fine of up to SAR 5 million (\$1.33 million), according to article 38 of the Telecommunication Act.4

According to regulations instituted in March 2018, cloud service providers are not liable for “unlawful content or infringing content [that] has been uploaded, processed, or stored” by the providers. However, cloud providers must remove any such content or render it inaccessible within the country after written notice by the CITC “or any other authorized entity.” If cloud providers become aware of any content on their platforms that “may constitute a violation” of the cybercrime law, they must notify the relevant authorities. Content may be exempt from filtering by a CITC decision if it is privately held and not publicly accessible.5

- 1. “Block Request Form, “Communications and Information Technology

Commission, accessed September 27, 2019, <http://web1.internet.sa/en/block>.

- [2.](#) CITC, “Annual Report, 2016,” 2017, <https://bit.ly/2p4cgCO>, accessed March 2017.
- [3.](#) “General Information on Filtering Service”, Communications and Information Technology Commission, accessed on September 27, 2019, <https://web1.internet.sa/en/general-information-on-filtering-service/>.
- [4.](#) “Telecommunication Act of Saudi Arabia,” Communications and Information Technology Commission, accessed on September 27, 2019, <https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/RulesandSystems/CITCSystem/Pages/Telecommuni...>
- [5.](#) CITC, “Cloud Computing Regulatory Framework,” 2018, <http://bit.ly/2pi4hl9>.

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?

04

Online self-censorship is pervasive. Social media users are extremely cautious about what they post, share, or “like” online due to the threat of harassment or prosecution under broadly worded antiterrorism and other laws. Users who express support for liberal ideals, minority rights, or political reform, in addition to those who expose human rights violations, are closely monitored and often targeted by the government.

Questioning religious doctrine is strictly taboo, particularly content related to the prophet Mohammed. Saudi women are often pressured to refrain from posting photos of their faces online. Twitter users are increasingly fearful of expressing support for outspoken activists who have recently received jail sentences. Such pressure has led many users to join social networks that offer more privacy, such as Snapchat and Path.

Influential government consultants have stopped contributing to foreign newspaper articles due to pressure from other government agency representatives. According to one prominent Saudi journalist, the “margin for free expression has shrunk significantly” in recent years in both print and online media channels. He noted increasing intolerance of criticism of the government’s performance—specifically regarding critiques, no matter how minor, of the crown prince’s Vision 2030 reform agenda.^{[1](#)} The threat of imprisonment, coupled with the risk of being labelled a

traitor by loyalist Saudi media outlets² has also led journalists and activists to self-censor (see B5, C3).³

The Ministry of Culture and Information requires that all blogs, forums, chat rooms, and other sites obtain a license from the ministry to operate, thus putting more pressure on online writers to self-regulate their content.⁴ However, this rule is generally enforced only for popular online publications.

- ¹. “Interview with Saudi journalist,” March 2018, Riyadh, telephone interview.
- ². “Khashoggi and the Caves of Afghanistan” (translated), Okaz, June 15, 2018, <https://www.okaz.com.sa/article/1649204>, “Saudi media brands women's rights activists 'traitors'”, The New Arab, May 19, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/5/19/saudi-media-brands-wom...>
- ³. “RSF issues warning about Saudi Arabia's Press Freedom Index ranking,” Reporters Without Borders, October 22, 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-issues-warning-about-saudi-arabias-press-fr...>
- ⁴. Reporters Without Borders, “Saudi Arabia,” Internet Enemies, 2012, <https://rsf.org/en/news/saudi-arabia-0>.

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 04

The Saudi government controls news outlets across all platforms, including in the digital sphere. Moreover, officials use a variety of online tactics to create an illusion of popular support for government policies. Critics suspect that the government employs an “electronic army” to continuously post progovernment views, particularly on social media. Progovernment trolls have taken to “hashtag poisoning,” a method of spamming a popular hashtag in order to disrupt criticism or other unwanted conversations through a flood of unrelated or opposing tweets.¹ Bots, or automated accounts, frequently share identical messages. The government also influences online news reporting by offering financial support to news sites such as *Sabq* and *Elaph* in return for coordination between site editors and the authorities.²

The government sought for years to silence Jamal Khashoggi’s criticism of it prior to his murder in October 2018. In 2010, Khashoggi had lost his column in *Al-Watan* due to government pressure; he had previously been the outlet’s editor in chief, before

being forced out of that position for similar reasons.³ In December 2016, the government banned Khashoggi from using Twitter and making televised appearances after he criticized the policies of US President Donald Trump,⁴ though the ban was lifted in August 2017.⁵ In late 2017, Khashoggi went into self-imposed exile in the US after writing in a *Washington Post* op-ed about the changing environment for reform-minded intellectuals in Saudi Arabia, as well as government intimidation and public shaming of popular media figures; he reportedly told his friends at the time that he feared arrest, as well as for his safety.⁶ Prior to his murder, Khashoggi also reportedly provided funding to Canada-based Saudi activist Omar Abdulaziz's initiative against misinformation and progovernment trolls.⁷

Shortly after Khashoggi's October 2018 disappearance, progovernment media began publishing articles reminding Saudis of the penalties associated with the Anti-Cyber Crime Law's stipulations against spreading "fake news" that may result in public disorder ([see C2](#)).⁸ In addition, an influx of progovernment bots and posts appeared on Twitter, where they attempted to displace a trending hashtag about the disappearance with support for Mohammed bin Salman and unrelated content. Moreover, after news of Khashoggi's murder broke, reports emerged that the government employed an electronic army based in Riyadh to suppress online expressions of dissent and smear government opponents in information operations targeting both domestic and foreign audiences.⁹ Those involved were given lists of dissidents to target on platforms including Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram, and reportedly were required to reach daily quotas.

Also in October 2018, it emerged that Saud al-Qahtani, a royal court advisor, had reportedly shaped media coverage through a WhatsApp group whose members included Saudi newspaper editors and notable journalists.¹⁰ While Al-Qahtani was dismissed from his media advisory role in October after being implicated in the killing of Khashoggi, Saudi rights activists claimed that he was still active behind the scenes, including through running the "electronic army."¹¹

Previously, a British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) report published in March 2018 found that several Saudi companies had been established to artificially boost the popularity of Twitter hashtags through the use of bots.¹² In November 2017, the government and its regional allies faced allegations of using Twitter bots to stifle reporting on the war in Yemen.¹³ Separately, the *New York Times* revealed that in 2015 Western intelligence authorities informed Twitter that the Saudi government was working with a Twitter employee who had access to the personal information of

several accounts.

- 1. “Fake accounts and drowning the hashtag in Twitter [in Arabic] Osama Al Muhaya, March 16, 2013, accessed 2013, <http://bit.ly/1Q13N8g>.
- 2. “Othman Al-Omair in Turning Point 8-5” [in Arabic] YouTube video, 8:11, published by Alnahry, 2009, May 31, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1LXn9um>.
- 3. David Ignatius, “Jamal Khashoggi chose to tell the truth. It’s part of the reason he’s beloved,” Washington Post, October 7, 2018, <https://beta.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/jamal-khashogg...>
- 4. “Saudi journalist banned from media after criticising Trump,” Middle East Eye, December 4, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-journalist-banned-media-after-...>
- 5. Jamal Khashoggi on Twitter, August 12, 2017, <https://twitter.com/JKhashoggi/status/896515210135179265>.
- 6. Jamal Khashoggi, “Saudi Arabia wasn’t always this repressive. Now it’s unbearable,” The Washington Post, September 18, 2017, <http://wapo.st/2FLNm1s>, Donna Abu-Nasr, “Who Is Jamal Khashoggi? A Saudi Insider Who Became an Exiled Critic,” October 20, 2018, <https://beta.washingtonpost.com/business/who-is-jamal-khashoggi-a-saudi....>
- 7. Bell Trew, “Bee stung: Was Jamal Khashoggi the first casualty in a Saudi cyberwar?,” The Independent, October 20, 2018, <https://ind.pn/2CzOw1k>.
- 8. “5-year jail, 3 million fine for rumormongers,” Saudi Gazette, October 13, 2018, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/545523>
- 9. Katie Benner, Mark Mazzetti, Ben Hubbard and Mike Isaac, “Saudis’ Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider,” New York Times, October 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/us/politics/saudi-image-campaign-twi...>
- 10. Alessandra Galloni and Simon Robinson, “How the man behind Khashoggi murder ran the killing via Skype,” Reuters, 22 October 2018, <https://reut.rs/2POkoTB>
- 11. Simeon Kerr, Anjli Raval and Andrew England, “Saudi ‘prince of darkness’ lingers in the shadows,” Financial Times, 19 November 2018, <https://on.ft.com/2qVbEjq>
- 12. “How much to fake a trend on Twitter? In one country, about £150,” BBC Trending, March 2, 2018, <http://bbc.in/2oBPDFL>.
- 13. “Thousands of Twitter Bots Are Attempting to Silence Reporting on Yemen,” al-Bawaba, November 22, 2017, <https://www.albawaba.com/loop/original-saudi-bots-yemen-suffering-10515....>

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online?

13

The owners of opposition websites struggle to remain financially viable as a result of censorship. Revenue from third-party advertisers can be heavily impacted by a government decision to block a website. The government can also request advertisers to cancel their ads on a particular website in order to pressure the website to close. Restrictions on foreign funding further inhibit the sustainability of websites that are critical of the government.

The Saudi Ministry of Media stipulates licensing requirements for those wishing to engage in electronic publishing activities. According to Article 7 of the Regulations for Electronic Publishing Activity, these include a requirement to be a Saudi national; at least 25 years of age; a university graduate; of "good conduct," and not employed by the government. The law also broadly proscribes certain activities. Article 15 prohibits publishing anything that contravenes Islamic law, violates public order, or serves "foreign interests," as well as material inciting a "spirit of discord" among society.¹

- ¹. "Regulations for Electronic Publishing Activity ," Ministry of Media website, <https://www.media.gov.sa/page/74>, accessed March 11, 2019

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity? 14

The government blocks a wide range of websites and can order the removal of content, limiting diversity in the online information landscape ([see B1](#) and [B2](#)). While opposition blogs and online forums were once the main venue for discussing political and social matters, such discussions now take place mostly on social media, as use of platforms like Twitter¹ and Snapchat² continues to grow.³ However, pressure on users to self-censor in order to avoid running afoul of authorities remains high ([see B4](#)).

The English-language websites of most international news agencies are available. Arabic content is widely available, as are Arabic versions of commonly used social media sites and mobile applications.

Opposition figures abroad use YouTube as a platform for distributing audio and video content, since their websites are blocked within the country.⁴ Omar Abdulaziz and Ghanem al-Dosari, two Saudi dissidents based in Canada and London respectively, produce politically themed shows that are critical of progovernment propaganda. Both have experienced several instances of their Twitter and Facebook accounts being blocked in Saudi Arabia (see B2).

- 1. Arab Social Media Report 2017, p45
<https://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/1383b88a-6eb9-476a-bae4-61903688099b....>
- 2. Rabiya Jaffery, “Is Saudi Arabia Addicted to Social Media?”, The Culture Trip, June 27, 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/articles/is-saudi-arabia-addicte...>; Claire Atkinson, “Al Jazeera calls for return to Snapchat's media platform in Saudi Arabia,” NBC News, October 22, 2018, <https://nbcnews.to/2JaEw1h>; Damian Radcliffe, “Social media in the middle east: Snapchat expands its MENA operation and user base,” July 6, 2018, <https://damianradcliffe.wordpress.com/2018/07/06/social-media-in-the-mi...>
- 3. Dave Chaffey, “Global social media research summary 2019,” Smart Insights, February 12, 2019, <https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strat...>
- 4. Examples include Sa'ad Al-Faqih, Mohammad al-Massari and Mohammad al-Mofarreh.

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

46

Saudis have increasingly taken to digital activism to express popular concerns and grievances. These online campaigns, most widely proliferating on Twitter, have mobilized diverse groups of constituents, though the most active participants have been young people.

In recent years the country saw an increase in online activism in support of

women's rights, including a widespread social media campaign in 2016 to end male guardianship of women, who under Saudi law, are treated as legal minors and cannot make critical decisions on their education, health, and career without the supervision of a male relative. After months of such campaigning, King Salman in 2017 issued royal decrees granting women the right to access certain public services without the approval of a male guardian, and the right to drive.^{[1](#)} In July 2018, a group of Saudi women launched an online radio station, Nsawya FM (Feminist FM) to advocate for women's rights and spread awareness of issues like domestic violence. While the station broadcasted from an unknown country, including through streaming websites such as Soundcloud and Mixlr, some of the contributors were reportedly based in Saudi Arabia.^{[2](#)}

However, during the coverage period of this report, Saudi authorities sought to rein in women's rights activists, including by prosecuting those who pursued their activism online. Several activists were detained in 2018 and were facing criminal charges in 2019 ([see C3](#)). In August 2018, Nsawya FM tweeted that Saudi authorities had blocked its Mixlr link. Their Twitter account was also suspended temporarily, with the company reportedly saying Nsawya's administrators had broken its rules.^{[3](#)} As of May 2019, the account no longer appears on Twitter.^{[4](#)}

Late 2018 and early 2019 saw several Saudi women flee the country, and the accompanying use of social media to publicize their plight.^{[5](#)} The most notable was Rahaf Alqunun, who fled Saudi Arabia through Thailand. Alqunun claimed she was abused by her family, and brought attention to her case by sending a series of tweets pleading for help while hiding from immigration authorities in Bangkok, who were allegedly attempting to forcibly return her to Kuwait, where her family was at the time. Alqunun's tweets were picked up and disseminated by prominent rights activists, and she was provided assistance by Human Rights Watch^{[6](#)} and ultimately granted asylum in Canada.^{[7](#)} Mohammad's case was debated heavily across Saudi social media.^{[8](#)}

- ^{[1](#)}. "Saudi Arabia's enduring male guardianship system," BBC, January 8, 2019, <https://bbc.in/2VZ5YTe>
- ^{[2](#)}. Alma Hassoun, "'We are real': Saudi feminists launch online radio", BBC, August 19, 2018, <https://bbc.in/2MlcbbC>
- ^{[3](#)}. James Purtill, "Of course we are scared': The women behind Saudi Arabia's anonymous feminist radio station," ABC, August 27, 2018, <https://ab.co/2FaLFMZ>.

- 4. <https://twitter.com/nsawya>
- 5. Ben Hubbard and Richard C Paddock, "Saudi Women, Tired of Restraints, Find Ways to Flee," The New York Times, January 11, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2TNp6md>; Hilary Whiteman and Ivan Whatson, "Desperate and alone, Saudi sisters risk everything to flee oppression," CNN, February 21, 2019, <https://cnn.it/2GWlauT>
- 6. Richard C. Paddock, "Fleeing Saudi Woman, Facing Deportation, Is Allowed to Remain in Thailand," New York Times, January 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/07/world/asia/saudi-thailand-asylum-rah....>
- 7. "Saudi woman fleeing alleged abuse heads to Canada for asylum," CNBC, January 11, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/12/saudi-woman-fleeing-alleged-abuse-heads....>
- 8. Prof.Dr.Faisal Bughdadi on Twitter, January 7, 2019, <https://twitter.com/PBughdadi/status/1085870771061379072>; Khalaf Aldossary on Twitter, January 5, 2019, <https://twitter.com/kalafaldossry/status/1085263924419796992>; Hamssonosi on Twitter, July 1, 2019, <https://twitter.com/hamssonosi/status/1145729726583123969>

C Violations of User Rights

During the reporting period, authorities arrested eight reformist writers and bloggers and recommended the death penalty for a cleric with a large online following. New reports of government surveillance through the use of sophisticated technology also emerged. Prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi was tortured and murdered by security agents in October 2018. There were additional accusations of torture of those detained in connection with their activity online, as well as cases of sexual abuse and and enforced disappearance.

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, 06 and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

Saudi Arabia has no constitution. The Basic Law of Saudi Arabia contains language that calls for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but only within certain

boundaries. The 2000 Law of Print and Press also addresses freedom of expression issues, though it largely consists of restrictions on speech rather than protections. Online journalists employed at newspapers and other formal news outlets maintain the same rights and protections as print and broadcast journalists, and like their counterparts, are subject to close government supervision.

Judges have significant discretion in how they interpret Sharia (Islamic law), which forms the basis of Saudi law.¹ However, the Saudi judiciary is also largely subordinate to the executive branch.²

- ¹. Reem Shamseddine, Mark Heinrich ed., “Saudi Arabia sets up commercial courts to expedite investment,” Reuters, October 16, 2017, <https://reut.rs/2KyWOXE>
- ². 2019 Index of Economic Freedom, The Heritage Foundation, <https://www.heritage.org/index/country/saudi-arabia>

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities?

04

Laws designed to protect users from cybercrimes contain clauses that limit freedom of expression. The 2007 Anti-Cyber Crime Law criminalizes “producing something that harms public order, religious values, public morals, the sanctity of private life, or authoring, sending, or storing it via an information network,” and imposes penalties of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to SAR 3 million (\$800,000).¹

An antiterrorism law introduced in November 2017 maintained broad definitions of what can be considered a terrorist act. The legislation includes criminal penalties of 5 to 10 years in prison for portraying the king or crown prince, directly or indirectly, “in a manner that brings religion or justice into disrepute,” and a 15-year prison sentence for those using their “social status or media influence to promote terrorism.” Executive oversight and enforcement power over counterterrorism measures were moved to the Public Prosecution and Presidency of the State Security; the latter is an intelligence and counterterrorism agency established in 2017. While such powers were previously under the purview of the Ministry of Interior, both bodies now report directly to the king.²

International rights groups continue to condemn the antiterrorism legislation as

unacceptably vague and inconsistent with international rights standards. After visiting Saudi Arabia in June 2018, a UN panel stated that dissidents had been jailed and tortured under the law.³ UN human rights experts repeated these assertions in March 2019 in relation to the upcoming trial of women's rights activists (see C3).⁴

- ¹. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Royal Decree No. M/17, Anti-Cyber Crime Law, March 2007, <https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/RulesandSystems/CITCSystem/Pages/Cybercrimes...>
- ². "Saudi Arabia: New Counterterrorism Law Enables Abuse," Human Rights Watch, November 23, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/23/saudi-arabia-new-counterterrorism-l...>
- ³. Olivia Alabaster, "Saudi Arabia using anti-terror laws to detain and torture political dissidents, UN says," The Independent, June 7, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-tortu...>
- ⁴. Stephanie Nebehay, "Saudi laws stifle dissent, women activists: U.N. rights experts," March 4, 2019, <https://reut.rs/2TyZcWA>

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities? 06

Saudi Arabia's restrictive laws are rigorously applied to silence critical voices and human rights defenders—many of whom operate primarily online, in light of a ban on traditional political organizing. Activists are frequently prosecuted for creating websites critical of the government, posting on Twitter, or appearing in YouTube videos documenting human rights abuses or calling for government action.

Authorities have targeted several individuals for their online dissent amid a widespread crackdown on intellectuals, academics, clerics, and members of the ruling family that started in September 2017.

In the spring of 2019, eight reformist writers and bloggers were arrested in separate crackdowns. Those arrested include Khadijah al-Harbi, a feminist writer in late-stage pregnancy, and her husband, Thumar al-Mazouqi; Anas al-Mazrou, a university lecturer who had expressed solidarity with Saudi political prisoners in a video that went viral; and two Saudi-US dual citizens, Bader al-Ibrahim and Salah al-Haidar, the latter of whom is the son of Aziza al-Youssef, herself a women's rights activist who was detained in May 2018.¹ The charges against these individuals were not made public, and no further information relating to their status has been released by the

government. However, they all had expressed support of the women's rights activists arrested in May 2018 (see below).

In October 2018, Essam al-Zamil, a writer, economist, and active Twitter user, was reportedly charged with membership in a terrorist group and passing "information and analysis about the kingdom" to foreign representatives without state authorization.^{[2](#)} He had been detained in 2017 after criticizing on social media Saudi plans to privatize a portion of Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil company.^{[3](#)}

Popular cleric Salman al-Awdah, who has roughly 14.5 million followers on Twitter, was also detained in September 2017, along with Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omari, prominent clerics with large online followings. Many believe al-Awdah was targeted for a tweet encouraging reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.^{[4](#)} In September 2018, Saudi prosecutors called for the death penalty for al-Awdah, reportedly in a "secret trial" in which he had no access to a lawyer.^{[5](#)} He faces 37 charges, including inciting public discord and membership in the Muslim Brotherhood.^{[6](#)} In May 2019, Middle East Eye reported that all three clerics would be sentenced to death and executed after Ramadan.^{[7](#)} However, according to other reports, al-Awdah's trial had yet to start at the end of this report's coverage period.^{[8](#)}

Several prominent women's rights activists were arrested in May 2018, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Iman al-Nafjan, and Aziza al-Youssef, who were initially held without formal charges being levelled against them.^{[9](#)} Two other women's rights activists were arrested in August 2018.^{[10](#)} Many of the women detained were campaigning against the government's ban on women drivers, which was lifted in June of that year, as well as the male guardianship laws that remain on the books. In late March 2019, three of them—Iman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Youssef, and Ruqayyah al-Muharib—were temporarily released on bail, though they still faced trial along with eight other activists on charges including contact with international media and human rights groups.^{[11](#)} In early May 2019, the Saudi government released four additional detainees,^{[12](#)} but the trials were ongoing at the end of the coverage period.^{[13](#)}

Additionally, in August 2018, prosecutors recommended the death penalty for Shia activist Israa al-Ghomgham. Arrested in 2015, she and four others were charged under the Cybercrime Act with protesting and publishing footage of protests on social media, among other crimes. The trial was set to take place in Saudi Arabia's terrorism tribunal in October 2018,^{[14](#)} but the current status of the case is unclear.

In January 2019, authorities denied they had sought the death penalty for Ghomgham.¹⁵

- ^{1.} Andrew England, “Saudi Arabia arrests supporters of jailed rights activists,” Financial Times, April 5, 2019, <https://on.ft.com/2QvVp8v>; “Saudi Arabia detains 3 more bloggers,” Committee to Protect Journalists, April 21, 2019, <https://ifex.org/saudi-arabia-detains-3-more-bloggers/>; “Activists slam Saudi Arabia for arresting ‘pregnant woman’,” Middle East Monitor, April 11, 2019 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190411-activists-slam-saudi-arabia-...>; “Saudi Arabia ‘arrests seven including US citizens’,” BBC News, April 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47826106>
- ^{2.} Andrew Roche, “Saudi economist who criticised Aramco IPO charged with terrorism – activists,” Reuters, October 1, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2u5x0MD>
- ^{3.} Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia Detains Critics as New Crown Prince Consolidates Power,” The New York Times, September 14, 2017, <http://nyti.ms/2phrxjS>.
- ^{4.} Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia Detains Critics as New Crown Prince Consolidates Power,” The New York Times, September 14, 2017, <http://nyti.ms/2phrxjS>.
- ^{5.} “Imprisoned Saudi cleric Awdah faces ‘secret trial’ without legal representation,” Al-Araby al-Jadeed, August 16, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/8/16/imprisoned-saudi-cleri...>; “Saudi prosecutor demands death penalty for cleric Awad al-Qarni,” Middle East Eye, September 6, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-prosecutor-demands-death-penal...>
- ^{6.} Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia Seeks Death Penalty in Trial of Outspoken Cleric,” New York Times, September 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-salman....>
- ^{7.} David Hearst, “Saudi Arabia to execute three prominent moderate scholars after Ramadan,” Middle East Eye, May 21, 2019 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-saudi-arabia-execute-three...>
- ^{8.} Tamara Qiblawi, “MBS once sought advice from this cleric. Now Saudi prosecutors want him executed,” CNN, July 25, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/25/middleeast/saudi-cleric-sheikh-salman-al....>
- ^{9.} “Saudi Arabia: International community cannot afford to remain silent about detained women’s rights activists,” Amnesty International, June 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/saudi-arabia-internation...>
- ^{10.} Aziz El Yaakoubi and Matthew Mpoke Big ed., ‘Saudi Arabia arrests two

more women's rights activists: rights group," Reuters, August 8, 2019, <https://reut.rs/2M2na9e>

- [11.](#) Tamara Qiblawi, "Saudi Arabia temporarily releases three women activists," CNN, March 28, 2019, <https://cnn.it/2UbQpKI>
- [12.](#) "Saudi Arabia frees four more women activists pending trial," France24, May 2, 2019, <http://f24.my/4rj5.T>
- [13.](#) "Saudi Arabia: Important Advances for Saudi Women," Human Rights Watch, August 2, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/02/saudi-arabia-important-advances-sau...>
- [14.](#) Emma Graham-Harrison, "Saudi Arabia seeks death penalty against female human rights activist," The Guardian, August 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/22/saudi-arabia-seeks-its-fi...>; "Netizen Report: Who else is being silenced in Saudi Arabia?," Global Voices, December 3, 2018, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2018/12/04/netizen-report-who-else-is-be...>
- [15.](#) David Brennan, "Activist Spared Death Penalty Amid Outrage," Newsweek, January 31, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-human-rights-israa-al-ghomgham-de...>

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?

14

Encrypted communications are banned in Saudi Arabia, though this is not often enforced.[1](#) Authorities frequently attempt to identify and detain anonymous or pseudonymous users and writers who make critical or controversial remarks.

In January 2016, the CITC required mobile network operators to register the fingerprints of new SIM card subscribers, and in August 2016, unregistered subscriptions were suspended. Subscribers were given a period of 90 days to document their fingerprints before the suspension became permanent.[2](#) The CITC said that the new requirement is meant to "limit the negative effects and violations in the use of communication services."[3](#) The new regulation built upon previous requirements to register subscribers' real names and identity numbers, even to recharge a prepaid mobile card,[4](#) which were often circumvented in practice.[5](#)

- [1.](#) Gene Spafford, Simson Garfinkel, Web Security, Privacy & Commerce, 2nd Edition (California: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2001),

<https://www.oreilly.com/library/view/web-security-privacy/0596000456/ch...>

- [2.](#) Al Riyadh Newspaper, “Unauthenticated mobile subscriptions to be suspended, tomorrow”, August 3, 2016, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1523484>.
- [3.](#) “Communication Commission mandates companies to register fingerprints before issuing cards ”[in Arabic], Al-Riyadh Newspaper, January 22, 2015, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1121516>.
- [4.](#) “User’s ID number now required to recharge prepaid mobile phones”, Arab News, July 4, 2012, <https://www.arabnews.com/user%E2%80%99s-id-number-now-required-recharge...>
- [5.](#) Faleh Al-Buyani, “Black market for SIM cards with ID thriving”, Saudi Gazette, December 31, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Q1amYu>.

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy?

06

Surveillance is rampant in Saudi Arabia. The government justifies the pervasive monitoring of nonviolent political, social, and religious activists by claiming that they are protecting national security and maintaining social order. The authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs, chat rooms, social media sites, emails, and text messages. After the government announced that it would lift its ban on online voice and video call services in September 2017, authorities claimed that all calls would be monitored and censored by the CITC.[1](#) However, it is unclear whether authorities have the ability to monitor platforms that use end-to-end encryption, such as WhatsApp. Nonetheless, Saudis have increasingly turned to messaging apps such as Signal which offer more secure encrypted communication platforms.

In September 2017, the government requested that citizens and residents monitor social media channels for subversive comments against the state. They were urged to report such comments to authorities using a phone app that was originally launched in 2016 to report traffic violations and theft. Many Saudis expressed support for these measures on social media, stating that they would enhance the country’s security.[2](#)

Saudi Arabia has long invested in sophisticated mass surveillance systems. In June 2017, a report by BBC Arabic and the Danish newspaper *Dagbladet* presented evidence that British aerospace and defense conglomerate BAE Systems sold Saudi

Arabia and other countries in the region such systems.³ In January 2018, media reports surfaced that the government acquired a stake in Italian spyware technology company Hacking Team through intermediaries.⁴ Saudi Arabia continues to purchase high-tech surveillance systems from Western companies. In October 2018, the European Parliament approved a resolution calling for an embargo on sales of surveillance equipment to Saudi Arabia.⁵

In late 2018, Canada-based Saudi activist Omar Abdulaziz filed a lawsuit against the Israeli company NSO Group, whose Pegasus surveillance tool was allegedly used to monitor phone calls between him and Khashoggi.⁶ Amnesty International also alleged that attempts were made to install Pegasus on the devices of both Saudi activist Yahya Asiri and one of its own staff members, the latter during a campaign by the organization against the arrests of Saudi women's rights activists. Amnesty subsequently requested that Israel rescind NSO Group's export license,⁷ and, after the Israeli Defense Ministry refused, said it would seek a legal order to compel the ministry to do so.⁸

In May 2019, international press sources reported that two Arab activists based in Norway and Canada received warnings from the CIA and the Norwegian and Canadian intelligence services over potential threats to their safety originating from Saudi Arabia. The activists, Norway-based Iyad al-Baghdadi and Canada-based Omar Abdulaziz, were both associates of Jamal Khashoggi and were publicly continuing his activism. A third, unnamed activist was also reportedly warned.⁹

In October 2018, reports emerged that in 2015, Western intelligence officials had informed Twitter that Saudi intelligence authorities had groomed and eventually "persuaded" a Twitter employee to spy on Saudi dissidents' Twitter accounts. The employee in question, Ali al-Zabarah, had first joined Twitter in 2013, and was fired by the company over these allegations in December 2015. Twitter subsequently emailed the owners of "a few dozen" accounts reportedly accessed by al-Zabarah informing them of the potential breach by "state-sponsored actors." According to sources quoted by the *New York Times*, al-Zabarah now works for the Saudi government.¹⁰

- ^{1.} "Saudi lifting ban on Skype, WhatsApp calls, but will monitor them," Reuters, September 21, 2017, <http://reut.rs/2jQpd3j>.
- ^{2.} "Saudi calls for social media informants decried as 'Orwellian,'" Reuters, 13 September, 2017, <http://reut.rs/2y0SNoj>
- ^{3.} "How BAE sold cyber-surveillance tools to Arab states," BBC, June 15, 2017, <http://bbc.in/2ryroXS>

- 4. Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai, “Hacking Team Is Still Alive Thanks to a Mysterious Investor From Saudi Arabia, Motherboard, January 31, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8xvzyp/hacking-team-investor-saudi-a...
- 5. Joint Motion for a Resolution, European Parliament website, October 10, 2018, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-8-2018-0498_EN.html?red...
- 6. David D. Kirkpatrick, “Israeli Software Helped Saudis Spy on Khashoggi, Lawsuit Says,” New York Times, December 2, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2zF5KrF>.
- 7. “Israel: ‘Rogue’ NSO Group must have licence revoked over controversial surveillance software,” Amnesty International, November 28, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.ca/news/israel-%E2%80%98rogue%E2%80%99-nso-group-mu...>
- 8. “Israel: Amnesty International engages in legal action to stop NSO Group’s web of surveillance,” Amnesty International, May 13, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.ca/news/israel-%E2%80%98rogue%E2%80%99-nso-group-mu...>
- 9. Josh Meyer, “‘Saudi Arabia Wants to Stop My Work.’ Activists Are Facing New Threats For Continuing Jamal Khashoggi’s Efforts,” May 19, 2019, Time, <https://time.com/5590171/new-threats-saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi/>.
- 10. Katie Benner, Mark Mazzetti, Ben Hubbard and Mike Isaac, “Saudis’ Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider,” New York Times, October 20, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2RXKNzP>.

C6 0-6 pts

Are service providers and other technology companies required to aid the government in monitoring the communications of their users?

16

There does not appear to be specific legislation related to data retention or interception. In 2013, a Saudi company approached a security researcher for help in surveilling mobile subscribers by intercepting traffic.¹ Given Saudi Arabia’s highly restrictive regime and known surveillance efforts, it is likely that telecommunication companies retain and intercept customer data for use by law enforcement agencies and state authorities.

Google reported that Saudi authorities made one “emergency disclosure request” for four accounts between January and June 2018, and that it had disclosed at least

some of the requested information.² Three requests were issued to Twitter during the same period, though the company did not comply,³ while none were made to Facebook.⁴ No such requests appear to have been made between July and December 2018.

- ¹. Kim Zetter, “Saudi Telecom Sought U.S. Researcher's Help in Spying on Mobile Users,” Wired, May 13, 2018 <https://www.wired.com/2013/05/saudi-telecom-sought-spy-help/>.
- ². “Requests for user information,” Transparency Report, Google, accessed September 27, 2019, https://transparencyreport.google.com/user-data/overview?hl=en&user_req...
- ³. “Transparency Report: Saudi Arabia,” Twitter, accessed September 27, 2019, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/countries/sa.html>.
- ⁴. “Transparency Report: Saudi Arabia” Facebook, accessed September 27, 2019, <https://transparency.facebook.com/government-data-requests/country/SA>

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in retribution for their online activities?

15

Online critics of the government routinely face intimidation, and many have been the victims of targeted violence. Numerous individuals detained in connection with online activism or other online activity have reported physical abuse including torture while in custody,¹ and torture resulting in death has been reported.² Some convicted of crimes have received sentences that include whipping.³

Mounting evidence strongly indicates that Jamal Khashoggi was tortured and murdered at the hands of the state security agents in October 2018. According to reports by the Turkish government, audio recordings demonstrated that Khashoggi was murdered soon after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, and his body was reportedly beheaded and dismembered within two hours by Saudi officials.⁴ After first denying that he was killed, Saudi authorities later classified the hit as part of a “rogue operation” before admitting that it was “premeditated.”⁵ As of May 2019, a secretive trial of the alleged perpetrators was ongoing.⁶ Khashoggi had frequently criticized Saudi authorities online and elsewhere.

Separately, during their trial, a number of female activists that had been arrested in

May and August 2018 told the court they were subjected to torture and sexual abuse during their detention ([see C3](#)).⁷ Loujain Al-Hathloul, who was still detained at the end of the coverage period, has similarly faced electric shocks, flogging, and threats of sexual violence, according to family members.⁸

In September 2018, human rights groups reported that Marwan Al-Muraisy, a Yemeni writer and online activist who vanished in June of that year, had been abducted by the Saudi government.⁹ In May 2019, Al-Muraisy was able to call his wife to confirm he was alive, though his location remains unknown.¹⁰

In October 2018, a man punched the well-known London-based Saudi critic Ghanem al-Dosari on a London street. The perpetrator, along with another man, also criticized al-Dosari for insulting the royal family. Al-Dosari claimed the attack was carried out by Saudi government agents.¹¹

Progovernment Twitter accounts often defame and harass activists by using hashtags to call for their arrest. The government reportedly uses an electronic army to target dissidents on Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram ([see B5](#)). For example, after Khashoggi was killed, progovernment bots tweeted threats and violent images in order to silence social media coverage of the murder.¹²

Private actors have been encouraged by authorities to persecute critics of the Saudi government online.¹³ Saud al-Qahtani, the Royal Court's media advisor until October 2018 ([see B5](#)), harassed Saudi bloggers and activists through concerted online campaigns, and reportedly kept a "blacklist" of government enemies, urging Saudi citizens to expand it by adding the names of those allegedly displaying treachery or a lack of patriotism ([see C8](#)).¹⁴

An increasing number of journalists who have openly scrutinized government policies in the past are now considering leaving the country out of fear of reprisals.¹⁵ However, the Saudi-based family members and associates of exiles remain at risk of becoming targets. For instance, two of Omar Abdulaziz's brothers and several of his friends were arrested in August 2018.¹⁶

In March 2019, international press sources reported that since 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had authorized a secret campaign to monitor, kidnap, detain and torture Saudi dissidents. The same Saudi government operatives involved in the murder of Khashoggi had carried out at least a dozen operations against Saudi citizens as part of this campaign, according to classified reports seen

by US officials.¹⁷

- ^{1.} Charlotte England, “Saudi Arabia to behead disabled man for taking part in protests,” The Independent, November 4, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-behead...>
- ^{2.} “Saudi general 'may have been tortured to death' during Ritz-Carlton crackdown,” The Telegraph, March 12, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/03/12/saudi-general-may-have-tort...>
- ^{3.} “Saudi Public Prosecutor v. Raif Badawi,” Global Freedom of Expression, Columbia University, <https://bit.ly/2MVHeHP>
- ^{4.} David D. Kirkpatrick and Carlotta Gall, “Audio Offers Gruesome Details of Jamal Khashoggi Killing, Turkish Official Says,” New York Times, October 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/world/europe/turkey-saudi-khashoggi-...>
- ^{5.} “Jamal Khashoggi's murder 'premeditated' - Saudi prosecutor,” BBC, October 25, 2018, <https://bbc.in/2qa76Wf>.
- ^{6.} “Saudi Arabia accused of undermining Jamal Khashoggi murder probe, holding secret trial,” CBS News, February 8, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi-murder-invest...>; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-khashoggi-murder-trial-absence-of-crown...>
- ^{7.} “Saudi women activists detail torture, sexual abuse at court hearing,” Deutsche Welle, March 28, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-women-activists-detail-torture-sexual-abuse...>
- ^{8.} “Family of Jailed Saudi Feminist Loujain Al-Hathloul: She Was Waterboarded, Flogged & Electrocuted,” DemocracyNow!, May 21, 2019, https://www.democracynow.org/2019/5/21/family_of_jailed_saudi_feminist_...
- ^{9.} “Saudi Arabia: Authorities must release Yemeni Writer Marwan Al-Muraisy,” ALQST, September 26, 2018, <https://alqst.org/eng/marwanalmuraisy/>.
- ^{10.} “Saudi Arabia forcibly disappears two foreign journalists, including Al Jazeera reporter,” The New Arab, May 20, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/5/20/riyadh-detains-two-for...>
- ^{11.} Andrew Gilligan, Saudi leader Mohammad bin Salman’s agents attacked me outside Harrods, says activist Ghanem al-Dosari,” The Times, 27 October 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/saudi-leader-mohammad-bin-salmans-ag...>
- ^{12.} Bel Trew, “Bee stung: Was Jamal Khashoggi the first casualty in a Saudi cyberware,” Independent, October 20, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/jamal-khashoggi-sa...>

- 13. “How the man behind Khashoggi murder ran the killing via Skype,” Reuters, October 22, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2POqzHf>.
- 14. Katie Benner, Mark Mazzetti, Ben Hubbard and Mike Isaac, “Saudis’ Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider,” New York Times, October 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/us/politics/saudi-image-campaign-twi...>; “Who is Saud al-Qahtani, the fired Saudi royal court adviser?,” Al Jazeera, October 20, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/saud-al-qahtani-fired-saudi-roya...>
- 15. “Interview with Saudi journalist,” March 2019, London, email interview.
- 16. Sondos Asem, “‘I do not accept blackmail’: Saudi activist in Canada defiant after brothers arrested,” Middle East Eye, August 23, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/i-do-not-accept-blackmail-saudi-acti...>
- 17. Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, “It Wasn’t Just Khashoggi: A Saudi Prince’s Brutal Drive to Crush Dissent,” The New York Times, March 17, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2THDCA9>

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? 13

While activists and government critics have experienced cyberattacks, such as the malicious installation of spyware on their phones, government-linked web accounts have also been targeted. For example, the Twitter account of the Citizen Accounts Program—a national cash-transfer program created to provide economic support to families—was hacked in January 2018.1

A number of public and private institutions have also faced security breaches. In October 2018, reports emerged that the Central Scientific Research Institute of Chemistry and Mechanics, a research group owned by the Russian state, was linked to a cyberattack that resulted in a Saudi petrochemical plant’s explosion in 2017.2 In March 2018, press reports emerged indicating that cyberattacks on petrochemical companies had also occurred in 2016.3

In September 2018, Microsoft published an intelligence report stating that Saudi Arabia was vulnerable to cyberattacks due to nonsecure consumer behavior and inadequate security measures, with botnets highlighted as particular concerns. According to the report, around 43 percent of bots in Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) countries originate from Riyadh.⁴

In early November 2017, the government launched the National Cybersecurity Authority (NCA), a central authority aiming to bolster the state's cybersecurity apparatus and protect its vital interests and national security. The agency is also tasked with fortifying the country's networks and IT systems.⁵ In September 2018, the NCA announced a new program focused on cyber resilience, under which 800 specialists would be trained. Previously, in June, the NCA signed an agreement with the education ministry to fund 1,000 degrees in cybersecurity for five years.⁶

- ^{1.} Nayef al-Rashid, "Saudi Arabia recovers citizen account program on Twitter after hack," Asharq al-Awsat, January 3, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/node/1131926>.
- ^{2.} Matthew Field, "Russian hackers linked to attempted sabotage of Saudi energy plant," The Telegraph, October 24, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/10/24/russian-hackers-linker...>
- ^{3.} Nicole Perlroth and Clifford Krauss, "A Cyberattack in Saudi Arabia Had a Deadly Goal. Experts Fear Another Try," The New York Times, March 15, 2018, <http://nyti.ms/2pcVjGw>.
- ^{4.} Bernd Debusmann Jr, "Saudi Arabia, UAE prime targets for cyber 'bots' attacks, says Microsoft," Arabian Business, September 24, 2018, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/technology/404829-saudi-arabia-uae-prim...>
- ^{5.} Reem Shamseddine and Michael Perry, ed. "Saudi Arabia sets up new authority for cyber security," Reuters, November 1, 2017, <http://reut.rs/2hxRfjx>.
- ^{6.} Robert Anderson, "Saudi to train 800 cyber security specialists," Gulf Business, 30 September, 2018, <https://gulfbusiness.com/saudi-train-800-cyber-security-specialists/>.



Country Facts

- **Freedom in the World Status**
Not Free
- **Networks Restricted**
No
- **Social Media Blocked**
Yes
- **Websites Blocked**
Yes
- **Pro-government Commentators**
Yes
- **Users Arrested**
Yes

Previous Reports

- [2018 Report](#)